

Connecting to the Internet: A Guide for Neighborhood Networks Centers

The guides in this series offer information on starting a center, creating programs and identifying center partners, marketing and media outreach, sustainability, funding, and much more. These updated guides feature new contacts, resources, case studies, and helpful information.

Neighborhood Networks is a community-based initiative established by HUD in 1995. Since then, centers have opened throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These community learning centers provide residents of HUD insured and assisted properties with programs, activities, and training that promote economic self-sufficiency.

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To receive copies of this publication or any others in the series, contact:

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All publications are available from the Neighborhood Networks Web site at www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org.

Copies of this TA guide are available in Spanish and can be requested from the Neighborhood Networks toll-free Information Center at (888) 312–2743.

Table of Contents

Connecting to the Internet: A Guide for Neighborhood Networks Center	s1
Internet Resources	3
Connecting to the Internet	7
Assessing a Center's Computer Capabilities	7
Choosing a Connection Method	8
Building a Network	10
Choosing an Internet Service Provider	10
DSL and Cable Resources	11
Partnership Opportunities	11
Installing the Right Software	11
Additional Neighborhood Networks Assistance	13
Appendix: Computer Specifications	15
Central Processing Unit	
Monitor	16
Keyboard and Mouse	16
Printer	16
Neighborhood Networks Information	17

Connecting to the Internet: A Guide for Neighborhood Networks Centers

For the past decade, Neighborhood Networks has brought technology access to communities across the country that otherwise would have been left behind in this time of digital evolution. Centers have successfully connected many lowand moderate-income residents to the abundance of information available through the Internet, including employment, education, and other community resources.

This guide provides examples of how everyone involved with a Neighborhood Networks center can benefit from Internet connectivity. As a rule, federal agencies cannot endorse commercial Web sites. This guide, therefore, provides links

to government Web sites as well as general information on how to use the Internet as a searchable information tool. In this guide, Neighborhood Networks center staff and residents will learn how:

- To access Internet resources.
- To assess a center's computer capabilities.
- To choose a method of connection.
- To build a network.
- To connect to the Internet.

The guide also provides an appendix with charts to use for determining and assessing technology needs.

Internet Resources

The benefits gained by providing Internet connectivity are limitless. Center staff should remember, however, that Neighborhood Networks centers often provide residents of insured and assisted housing their first exposure to Internet access. For this reason, centers should consider offering classes that will help residents learn how to effectively use the Internet while avoiding the more unseemly snares of Web surfing. Suggestions for possible Internet-based classes include the following:

- Introduction to the Internet. Residents learn the basics of Web surfing such as using search engines and establishing a personal e-mail account. Center staff can also teach residents how to recognize when it is appropriate to provide personal information (such as when purchasing something from a reputable online store) and recognize when they may be faced with an Internet scam.
- Scholastic research. Students coming to the center for afterschool programs learn how to effectively use the Internet to assist them with writing term papers or completing homework assignments. Students also learn how to determine a reliable source (such as an online encyclopedia) versus subjective or misleading information (such as a personal Web log).
- Employment services. Residents seeking employment learn how to put popular job search engines and their services to good use.

In addition to the following Internet resources, center staff and residents may want to consider visiting their local library to read the latest computer-related magazines. These periodicals keep readers abreast of the latest technology trends, including the best Internet sites for education, information, and entertainment.

Federal government resources. As a HUD initiative, Neighborhood Networks often promotes complementary programs offered by other government agencies. Residents and center staff may find that independent searches of these agency Web sites reveal programs that will benefit centers and residents. To this end, the federal government has created FirstGov, a portal site that allows users to perform governmentwide searches on the national, state, and local levels. Users can access English or Spanish versions of the FirstGov Web site at the following links:

- www.firstgov.gov
- www.firstgov.gov/Espanol/index.shtml

Residents who wish to go directly to a particular federal agency's main Web site should use the following links. Note that several government agencies also have Spanish language mirror sites. Those sites are indicated when available.

Department of Agriculture

- www.usda.gov
- www.usda.gov/EnEspanol/

Department of Commerce

- www.commerce.gov
- www.commerce.gov/index_spanish.htm

Department of Defense

• www.defenselink.mil

Department of Defense Inspector General

• www.dodig.osd.mil

Department of Education

- www.ed.gov
- www.ed.gov/espanol/bienvenidos/es/index.html

Department of Energy

www.energy.gov

Department of Health and Human Services

www.hhs.gov

Department of Homeland Security

• www.dhs.gov

Department of Housing and Urban Development

- www.hud.gov
- espanol.hud.gov

Department of Justice

www.usdoj.gov

Department of Labor

www.dol.gov

Department of State

- www.state.gov
- www.spanish.state.gov

Department of the Interior

- www.doi.gov
- www.doi.gov/spanish/index.html

Department of the Treasury

- www.ustreas.gov
- www.ustreas.gov/es/index.html

Department of Transportation

www.dot.gov

Department of Veterans Affairs

- www.va.gov
- www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/milsvc/benfacts.htm (access Spanish version of VA fact sheets)

Neighborhood Networks resources. Center staff can access a repository of information and assistance on the initiative's Web site. The site provides weekly updates on topics such as funding sources, success stories, information on partnerships and consortia, and news on upcoming events. Staff can also find electronic versions of Neighborhood Networks printed materials, including fact sheets, technical assistance guides, and newsletters.

The Neighborhood Networks Web site also contains an online networking forum, linked from the site's index page. Centers can visit the forum to participate in monthly discussions and share their experiences with staff from other centers. They can also use this electronic forum to submit technical assistance questions.

Referenced Web site:

• Neighborhood Networks www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org

Workforce development resources. Many colleges and universities have begun offering online degree programs and continuing education courses. Residents in entry-level positions, which often require working hours that are not compatible with regular scholastic schedules, will appreciate the flexibility of an online program's coursework. Residents who wish to obtain employment or advance in their current careers can use the Internet to learn more marketable job skills.

Residents can find résumé assistance and career advice and perform national and local searches through many Web-based job search engines. The U.S. Department of Labor, for example, maintains America's Job Bank, a national job search engine under its Career One-Stop initiative. Residents will also find many useful employment services at One-Stop's main Web site, including job searching tips and an online career center. Residents interested in looking for federal government positions can access USAJobs, a database maintained by the Office of Personnel Management.

Many newspapers also have searchable online versions of their weekly employment advertisements. Residents can use one of the Internet's many search engines to locate their local newspaper online.

Referenced Web sites:

 Career One-Stop www.careeronestop.org

- America's Job Bank www.ajb.dni.us
- USAJobs www.usajobs.opm.gov

Educational resources. The Internet is a valuable resource tool for students tasked with researching school projects. Students can find free services such as online dictionaries and newspapers (however, online newspapers typically charge a minimal fee to access their electronic archives). Additionally, many encyclopedias have created online services that offer free searches in addition to their premium services. Centers with a primary focus on afterschool programs might consider including funds in their budget for access to one of these encyclopedias.

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) offers several educational resources as well. Students' Classroom, maintained by ED's National Center for Education Statistics, provides elementary and high school students with information on their schools, educational games, word-of-the-day options, graph assistance, and many other resources. Students seeking more substantive homework assistance will find information and links on ED's Federal Resources for Educational Excellence Web site, which is a collaborative effort of more than 30 federal agencies to make federally supported teaching and learning resources easier to find.

ED also provides online assistance to collegebound students. A portion of the Students' Classroom Web site, College Search, allows students to find the following information on colleges in which they are interested:

- Tuition and finance information.
- Majors/programs offered.
- Enrollment information.
- Library information.
- Campus security information.

The Federal Student Aid Web site helps students locate financial aid sources and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Web site allows students to determine whether or not they are eligible for this government financial aid. If they are eligible, students are then able to fill out an online version of the FAFSA form.

Additionally, students can use the Internet to research and apply to colleges and universities. Most schools typically have online information about their scholarship and financial aid services as well as course information; therefore, students will be able to apply for financial assistance when they submit their entrance applications.

Referenced Web sites:

- Students' Classroom nces.ed.gov/nceskids/index.asp
- Federal Resources for Educational Excellence www.ed.gov/free/index.html
- College Search nces.ed.gov/nceskids/college/index.asp
- Federal Student Aid studentaid.ed.gov
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid www.fafsa.ed.gov

E-mail and online communication resources.

The Internet offers e-mail services that are both free and reliable. For example, several of the major online search engines provide e-mail services, which residents can use to send out electronic versions of their résumés to potential employers. High school students can benefit from having a personal e-mail address when they send out applications to colleges. Several companies also offer free online messaging services that allow users to communicate with family and friends in a real-time setting.

Connecting to the Internet

To ensure that residents gain the full benefit of connectivity, centers must first determine that they have computers capable of maximizing a resident's online experience. For example, many companies are taking advantage of multimedia advances such as Macromedia Flash programs that integrate video, audio, and animation to enhance their Web sites. Centers, therefore, should assess the technology levels of the equipment they have to ensure it has the technological configuration needed to support its programs and perform operational tasks.

Assessing a Center's Computer Capabilities

The following are basic areas to consider when assessing a computer's capabilities. For additional guidance, see the appendix, Computer Specifications.

- **Processor.** The processor is the heart of the central processing unit (CPU). This portion of the computer handles the information received from software. Processor speed, measured in megahertz (MHz) or gigahertz (GHz), determines the efficiency of a computer's performance. The general rule is that the speed and efficiency with which a computer operates increase with processor speed. Centers should keep in mind that if they intend to run more high-end software such as graphics programs, multimedia software, three-dimensional (3-D) imaging, or speech recognition software, they should consider purchasing faster processors. However, centers should remember that the faster the processor, the more expensive the unit. Common processor speeds for personal computers at Neighborhood Networks centers range from 500 MHz to 1.33 GHz.
- Memory. Random access memory (RAM)
 works in tandem with the processor to improve a computer's performance and, as
 with processor speed, higher speeds will

increase computer performance. Centers should search for computers that possess no fewer than 128 megabytes (MB) of RAM. The more high-end computers can have up to 1,024 MB. The most common RAM used in desktop computers is synchronous dynamic RAM (SDRAM). This type of memory is synchronized with the computer's internal clock, which allows the SDRAM to transfer data to the processor almost instantaneously. Double data rate SDRAM (DDR SDRAM) is another popular memory choice for desktop computers. DDR memory is, on average, twice as fast as SDRAM.

- Operating systems. Desktop systems typically run on Microsoft Windows. To ensure that a center can run current software programs and the software supplied by whichever Internet Service Provider (ISP) they choose, staff should consider upgrading their operating system software to Windows 2000 or XP.
- Storage. Most computers today come with at least a 20-gigabyte (GB) hard drive and a 3.5-inch floppy disk drive. Since most computer software is now stored on compact discs (CD), centers should also ensure that their systems have either a CD-ROM or CD-R drive. A CD-R allows users to encode information files that are too large for a floppy disk onto CD. CD-ROMs can hold up to 700 MB of information. DVD-ROM drives are similar in capability to CD-ROM drives, but they are also able to play DVD movies. Centers may also want to consider Zip or Jaz drives, which save information onto disks that resemble thick floppy disks and can hold 100 MB to 2 GB of data.
- Ports. Centers interested in exploring the option of wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) need to make certain their computers have universal serial bus (USB) ports. (See "Building a Network" for more information on Wi-Fi.)
 These ports are also becoming the preferred

ports for peripheral devices such as printers, scanners, and digital scanners. Older peripherals may still connect with parallel or serial ports. Many computer retail Web sites sell adapters that allow these devices to connect through USB ports if the computer does not have the older ports.

- Graphics. Because the Internet is fast becoming rife with multimedia effects, centers should try to purchase video cards that will be able to handle high-end graphics. Usually a motherboard, which is the main circuit board inside a computer that controls the CPU and provides ports for peripherals, comes with an integrated video card that is sufficient for simple applications such as document files or spreadsheets. For graphics performance and image quality, 3-D video cards are preferable but are also more expensive. Centers should also note that computers need a minimum of 128 MB of RAM to properly run a 3-D video card and they require monitors that can handle the resolution displayed by these cards. For example, a video card capable of 1,600 by 1,024 resolution requires a monitor that can display this range of color. Most monitors on the market today are designed with advanced graphics in mind.
- Sound. Many motherboards come with integrated sound cards. The more modern integrated cards have advanced far enough that they provide adequate audio output. However, centers may want to consider a sound card that provides greater output, particularly for computers being used by children who might be interacting with online educational games, which depend heavily on visual and audible interaction.
- Modem. The type of modem depends on a center's method of Internet connection (see "Choosing a Connection Method" for further information). Centers that choose a dialup service will need a modem that sends and

receives data through a telephone-based connection. Because of laws designed to protect telephone systems from possible overload caused by higher voltages for higher speeds, dial-up connections are limited to 56,000 bits per second (56 K bps). Centers can currently purchase internal 56 K bps modems for as little as \$10–\$20. Broadband connections will require special modems, which can be purchased from the center's ISP.

Choosing a Connection Method

Once a center has assessed its computer capabilities, it is time to determine the best method for connecting to the Internet. Before connecting, however, centers should ensure that their computers are protected from the myriad viruses that circulate throughout the Internet. It is highly recommended that centers invest in antivirus software for any computers that will be linked to the Internet.

Dial-up connections. Smaller centers or centers where there is little demand for Internet access might consider connecting only one computer to a dial-up ISP. If a center chooses a dial-up service, they must remember that the telephone line they use for the connection should be a direct outside-dialing line and not part of a larger telephone system. Neighborhood Networks centers with only one telephone connection should also realize that incoming and outgoing calls are blocked when the computer is connected to the Internet. These centers may want to consider purchasing a second line.

The following chart provides additional factors a center should consider in regard to dial-up connections:

Factor	What to Consider
Connection speed	How fast is the ISP's connection speed?
	A center with 56 K modems will want to choose an ISP that has also has 56 K modems.
	Recommendation: Confirm connection speed before establishing an account with an ISP.
Flat-rate versus per-hour charges	Does the ISP charge one fee for unlimited access or does it charge a flat rate for a given number of hours plus a per-hour charge for any usage over that limit?
	It can be difficult to control Internet connection time in a center with more than a few staff and resident users.
	Recommendation: Choose flat-rate unlimited access.
User-to-modem/bandwidth ratio	How many simultaneous connections can the ISP support?
	An ISP with only 25 modems is going to be busy more often than an ISP with 100 modems. Similarly, a cable service with many users may be slower than one with few users.
	Recommendation: Choose an ISP that offers a user-to-modem ratio of no greater than 10 users to 1 modem/connection.
Staying power	Has the ISP been in business long enough to have a record of success and customer satisfaction?
	Recommendation: Avoid new ISPs until they have proven their stability.
Personal Web pages	Does the ISP provide space on its servers for users to create personal Web pages?
	Free Web space can be an ideal means to create a basic Web presence for the center without spending additional dollars for Web hosting.
	Recommendation: Look for at least 5 MB of server space at no additional charge.
Support	Is the ISP willing and able to answer questions and work with center staff to solve problems?
	Recommendation: Do some informal word-of-mouth research before finalizing a decision.
Nonprofit or educational rates	Does the ISP offer nonprofits or educational institutions a discount or special benefits?
	Discounts may be able to reduce startup or monthly costs by as much as 20 percent.
	Recommendation: Ask for discounts or perks, such as free Web hosting, installation cost waivers, and in-kind (or comped) equipment. Ask about this even if the services are not offered.

Dedicated connections. Centers that plan on placing more emphasis on their Internet activities should consider a broadband connection such as cable or a digital subscriber line (DSL). These are dedicated connections, which means that computers are continuously connected to the Internet. For this reason, centers should consider firewall protection to prevent unwanted outside access to information stored on their computers. Centers considering dedicated connections may also want to consider connecting their computers to a network to maximize Internet connectivity for residents.

Building a Network

A network is a group of two or more computers linked together. A typical network is composed of a *server*, the main computer that joins together *clients*, and computers that connect clients to the server and allow them to share access to the information stored in the server. Networks also allow clients to share access to peripherals, such as printers, connected to the server.

Typically, a server has much more memory and storage space than the individual clients and uses special software to manage the network. Typical tasks performed by servers include managing email communications within an office, shared storage space, and printing. Complex networks may include several servers, each of which is responsible for a specific task such as connecting to the Internet or managing printing. Benefits of networks include the following:

- Clients can rapidly communicate and interact with one another.
- Clients can realize cost savings through joint use of peripherals such as printers.
- Clients can share a single Internet connection.

Networks are either local area networks (LAN) or wide area networks (WAN). In LAN systems, the clients and any peripherals are connected within a single office or building. Networks found in most Neighborhood Networks centers

are LANs. A WAN system connects several LANs over longer distances using telephone wires or radio waves.

Wi-Fi is a rapidly advancing network option. This technology allows computers to connect to other computers or to a single Internet connection through radio signals that are sent to a base station. These base stations have an average range of 100 to 300 feet indoors and up to 2,000 feet when used outdoors. Using base stations and Wi-Fi adapters, centers can set up a wireless LAN (WLAN) for a minimal fee. Base stations can be purchased for less than \$100 and adapters are available for as low as \$12 through popular Internet-based retailers.

Centers interested in building a network can contact the Neighborhood Networks Information Center toll-free at (888) 312–2743 or e-mail neighborhoodnetworks@hud.gov. Information Center staff can answer questions and help connect centers to appropriate technical assistance from trained professionals who can help determine the best design for the center.

Choosing an Internet Service Provider

Once a data connection has been chosen, an ISP must be selected from among those that provide the kind of data connection a center needs. Everyone who connects to the Internet uses an ISP. ISPs sometimes provide extra services for members only. For example, there may be information clearinghouses, regularly scheduled celebrity chat events, or the ability to privately connect to others who are also online. Most online services charge a monthly membership fee and/or an hourly fee for the connection time.

Most commercial Internet service providers include these services in their monthly fee:

- Hours of access.
- Space for hosting a Web site.
- At least one e-mail account.

Available options for free ISP service may change frequently over time, as these sites sometimes go out of business. A Web site that provides information about the latest available free ISP service options is www.freedomlist.com.

DSL and Cable Resources

DSL is offered by many different companies, including several of the major telephone companies. Cable connections are available through a local cable company. Both of these broadband connections are rapidly growing in popularity among Internet subscribers. However, centers located in more rural areas may find they cannot access one or both of these services at this time. Centers interested in finding local DSL or cable providers can visit www.broadbandreports.com. Subscription fees for DSL or cable are approximately \$50 per month.

Partnership Opportunities

Centers worried about the cost of Internet connectivity might want to consider establishing a partnership to help alleviate some of the financial weight. For example, the Dartmouth Square Neighborhood Networks Center in Inkster, Michigan, established a partnership with Comcast Communications, Inc., the local cable provider. Comcast provided the center with a free high-speed cable connection and a reduced fee for the equipment the center needed to connect their systems.

Centers interested in learning more about establishing a community partnership can contact the Neighborhood Networks Information Center toll-free at (888) 312–2743 or e-mail neighborhoodnetworks@hud.gov.

Installing the Right Software

Each computer that connects to the Internet needs specific software that allows users to connect to the Internet, view Web pages, and access e-mail accounts. The majority of ISPs, DSL, and cable providers give users such software with their subscriptions.

Additional Neighborhood Networks Assistance

A center can benefit from connecting to the information superhighway. Since technology changes rapidly and often dramatically, knowing what to do is not always easy. For additional questions about how to best achieve technical goals, contact the Neighborhood Networks Information Center:

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Neighborhood Networks 2277 Research Boulevard, 5J Rockville, MD 20850 E-mail: neighborhoodnetworks@hud.gov Web site: www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org

Neighborhood Networks Information Center

Phone: (888) 312–2743 TTY: (800) 483–2209

Appendix Computer Specifications

This appendix provides an overview of important factors to consider and some recommendations for minimum and desirable specifications when deciding on a new or refurbished computer for a center.

An important factor to consider when selecting a computer is the total cost of hardware upgrades and additional components. Some computer components such as the CPU, RAM, and hard drive may be expensive to upgrade. Therefore, it is important to select a computer with existing CPU, RAM, and hard drive specifications that meet a center's needs. Hardware of this type that is on the low end of the technology spectrum is likely to cause the computer to operate relatively slowly. Other computer components, such as disk and CD-ROM drives and network and multimedia cards, can be purchased or upgraded at a relatively more affordable cost. The quality of these components is less likely to affect the overall performance or speed of the computer.

Central Processing Unit

Component	Recommendation
OS	Windows for PC computers (current versions are 2000, NT, and XP)
	MacOS for Macintosh computers (current version is 10.4)
Processor	PCs • Speed (MHz): the higher the better, but 500 MHz is enough Macs
	Speed/type: the fastest is the G5 (up to 2.5 GHz), but G4 is enough
Hard drive	The more the better: at least 20 GB
RAM	The more the better: recommend 512 MB, but no less than 128 MB
Cache	No less than 512 K
Floppy disk drives	A 3.5-inch floppy disk drive is standard
CD-ROM drive	At least 16X speed
Sound card	Many motherboards contain integrated sound cards; consider an additional card if multi- media sound is important
Graphics card	RAM: at least 2 MB or 4 MB if the computer uses a 17-inch monitor Bus: look for PCI or AGP, not ISA
Modem	Internal recommended for both desktop and laptop
	Speed: at least 56 K
	Fax/data/voice: voice capable allows a computer to serve as an answering machine; fax capable allows a computer to serve as a fax machine. A computer with a fax-capable modem should connect to a printer.
Expansion capacity	Bays: prefer PCI
	PCMCIA (credit-card size expansion slots): must have at least one for laptops
Speakers	Usually included in package

Monitor

Sometimes a monitor is not included in the listed price for a computer. Check to make sure that it is included.

Factor	Recommendation
Screen size	At least 17 inches (15.9-inch viewable), but 19 inches (17.9-inch viewable) is best
(viewable area)	For laptop, at least 12.1 inches
Dot pitch	Lower is better: no more than .28
Maximum resolution	No less than 1,024 x 768 for a 17-inch screen
(number of pixels)	
Display type	Active matrix (dual scan or TFT) preferred
(notebooks)	Passive matrix (DFTN) minimum
	Liquid crystal not recommended

Keyboard and Mouse

These elements are usually included in a computer purchase, but check to make sure that they are included. The following options are available:

- Track ball. Users who have medical conditions that limit dexterity (for example, arthritis or carpal tunnel syndrome) or with limited space on their desks, or centers that have small children using their computers should consider buying a track ball instead of a mouse. It sits in one place on the table and users move the roller ball to move the cursor on the screen.
- **Ergonomic keyboard.** Several versions have been designed to take some of the stress of typing off of shoulders and arms.
- Laptop touch pad versus pointing sticks versus rolling ball. These devices are usually built into a laptop keyboard to allow onscreen cursor control without adding a normal mouse. Touch pads are recommended because they are less likely to wear out.

Printer

The first decision is whether to purchase a laser printer, which produces a clearer image by bonding a dry toner to the paper, or an ink-jet printer, which sprays the paper with ink. Both are evaluated according to the following factors.

Factor	Recommendation		
Resolution (dots per inch, dpi)	The higher the better: no less than 600 dpi for either type of printer		
Page speed (page per minute, ppm)	nute, ppm) The higher the better: no less than 8 ppm for either type of printer		
Paper capacity (number of sheets)	The more the better: drawers are preferred over vertical paper feeders		
Black versus color	Ink jet: color is reasonable Laser: black and white		

Neighborhood Networks Information

For more information about Neighborhood Networks, visit the Neighborhood Networks Web site at www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org or contact the Neighborhood Networks information center toll-free at (888) 312–2743, or TTY at (800) 483–2209. The Web site contains valuable information for centers, including:

HUD NN Coordinators

Neighborhood Networks coordinators listing.

Center Database

Information about operational centers and those in planning. Neighborhood Networks centers across the U.S. listed geographically by state.

Property Database

Information about Neighborhood Networks properties listed geographically by state.

Resources Database

Information about funding, technical assistance, publications, and Web site resources.

News Database

Articles, press releases, success stories, and grand openings relevant to Neighborhood Networks.

List of Conferences

Calendar of conferences and training events.

List of Resident Associations

List of Neighborhood Networks properties with active resident associations.

Neighborhood Networks Consortia

List of Neighborhood Networks consortia.

Senior Properties

List of senior properties with operational Neighborhood Networks centers.

Online Networking

Talk with Neighborhood Networks staff and stakeholders via online networking.

Publications

- Fact sheets. Fact sheets are one-page summaries of various topics relevant to the operations of Neighborhood Network centers.
 Fact sheets that are currently available include an overview of the initiative, health information, childcare, transportation, seniors, and community improvements at Neighborhood Networks centers.
- Network News (current and past issues). A semiannual newsletter that highlights national achievements for a wide audience, including partners and the public.
- NNewsline (current and past issues). A semiannual newsletter that highlights topics of interest to Neighborhood Networks centers and coordinators.

